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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000524

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/25/2018

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: STATE MEDIA UNSURE HOW TO MEET THE
PRESIDENT'S CALLS FOR IMPROVEMENT

REF: ASHGABAT 0474

Classified By: CHARGE SYLVIA REED CURRAN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) President Berdimuhamedov gave state media a May deadline to make significant improvements in the quality of its broadcasting. Despite the president's calls for creativity and higher quality news and programming, it appears state media is not able at this stage to meet these demands. In a meeting with a reliable state media contact, PAO learned that there is a shared goal but not shared vision of how to achieve this. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov held a televised, expanded Cabinet of Ministers meeting (reftel) and once again called for improvements in the quality of state TV and radio broadcasting. Similar to previous statements, the president emphasized the importance of culture and media as a tool for the spiritual, moral, and esthetic education of the nation. He again noted that he had directed significant funding to state media in order to improve their technical base and equipment and create conditions that would strengthen journalists' capacity for creative and productive work. Despite having raised this problem previously, Berdimuhamedov noted that the deficiencies remain.

CRITICISMS FROM THE HEAD OF STATE

¶3. (U) During the meeting, Berdimuhamedov:

- fired the director of the "Altyn Asyr" TV channel (one of four state TV channels) for shortcomings in his work;
- praised the "Ovaz" radio station for its popularity, but noted the low quality of its broadcasts, which would have led to dismissals lng ago, if employment was based on work quality;
- emphasized that media employees should be judged or rewarded based on the popularity and creativity of their work, including giving financial incentives to those who are successful;
- noted that heads of media agencies must be able to select and prepare qualified employees and use them in accordance

with their abilities;
-- pointed out opportunities for media training abroad. While he said this should continue, he noted it had not yet produced results;
-- called for a review of educational programs that train media personnel, especially for political analysis;
-- complained about the public's lack of knowledge about international issues. Saying that the public should be better informed, he called for an "International Life" department. (NOTE: The newly named director of this department was just nominated for an International Visitors leadership Program for broadcast journalism. END NOTE.); and,
-- gave state media until May 1 to accomplish the tasks fully or warned that necessary "measures" will be taken.

WHAT NOW?

¶4. (C) On April 18, PAO met with a trusted Ministry of Culture contact, International Department Director Agadurdy Akmuradov, who is a TV journalist by training. Akmuradov seemed frustrated with a system which cannot accommodate the president's expectations. Akmuradov described the situation as "a horse stuck in the mud. We're pulling it by the reins and whipping it from behind. Either it won't move or it will trample us." Although he had a good idea of what Berdimuhamedov expects, Akmuradov said the system itself needs more restructuring and time to produce the changes demanded by the president. He reported that there would be a major gathering of all state broadcasting personnel to discuss next steps. They are looking for any good ideas that would help them meet the May deadline.

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NO INCENTIVES, LOTS OF INTERFERENCE

¶5. (C) Akmuradov doubted Berdimuhamedov would be satisfied with progress by the May deadline. In addition to describing a state structure which does not reward creativity or new ideas or even measure popularity or performance of employees, Akmuradov noted three specific problems that make reform difficult:

-- Technical incompetence: Although the state has spent money on advanced equipment for TV and radio production, personnel have not been trained in their use. In particular, camera operators lose lots of time trying to use new cameras and often make simple, avoidable errors.

-- Editors have no experience or have had no incentive to improve their programs. In addition, there is a burdensome approval process that prevents innovation.

-- Interference from above: Akmuradov cited the most troubling obstacle as the constant flow of critiques and complaints from the President's office. He said that every insignificant detail is critiqued, including the shade of dark blue of a program host's suit or the way a person pronounces a certain word. On this point, Akmuradov elaborated that higher ups do not understand that constant, often irrelevant, complaints create major disincentives to doing anything new.

LACKING A HIGH-LEVEL ADVOCATE FOR MEDIA

¶6. (C) According to Akmuradov it makes matters worse that Deputy Chair of the Cabinet of Ministers for Culture and Broadcasting, Maisa Yazmuhamedova has no experience in the field of journalism or broadcasting. Her background is in education, and she rose quickly to high-level government positions. While expressing his respect for her as an official, he noted that she probably has no idea how to advocate for greater independence or autonomy of state media in order to create the kind of improved programming the president is calling for. Speaking openly, he suggested that broadcasting probably needed to be separated from the

Ministry of Culture and be headed by a more forceful and more knowledgeable advocate for media's autonomy, giving it room to make changes.

¶17. (C) To address the major problems of creativity and improved international information, Akmuradov said that they were considering a kind of "reward budget" that could become a kind of bonus program for good work

WE LIKE YOUR IDEAS, BUT ...

¶18. (C) PAO asked Akmuradov about adopting interactive programs that could serve the purpose of supporting reform policies as well as bring the country's leadership closer to the audience. (This basic concept was a highlight of post's media specialist who worked closely with state TV for two weeks in March.) In reply, Akmuradov said that such good ideas were not new, but that the system and the fear of passing good ideas up prevents them from trying such innovative (by Turkmen standards) programming.

SEARCHING FOR NEUTRAL CONTENT FROM ABROAD

¶19. (SBU) PAO also pitched the idea of borrowing Voice of America Russian content for rebroadcast in Turkmenistan. Akmuradov immediately saw this as a non-starter, at least for now. He said the government might be more willing to consider content and cooperation with Internews. However, Akmuradov added that they had concluded an agreement with BBC to provide access to 500 satellite channels which they may use for informational purposes as well as developing international content for rebroadcast.

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A CONTINUED, SUSTAINED RELATIONSHIP MAY BE THE ONLY WAY

¶10. (C) Although Akmuradov was appreciative of many program ideas from the U.S. Government, he said the only thing that would really impact change would be a sustained partnership with a western media outlet. he said that one time programs or training were helpful, but would produce little change because of the current structure of state television. A sustained relationship, however, with foreign broadcasters and exposure to their practices would eventually lead to more and more borrowing of those practices. He asked for a concrete proposal for a permanent cooperative relationship with a credible, foreign broadcasting company.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: Many officials who work within state media believe they need more autonomy and room to try new practices. Exchanges and training programs would help increase exposure to international standards and improve capacity. However, until the media can achieve a greater degree of autonomy, the full benefit of exchange programs will not be realized. END COMMENT.

CURRAN